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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a 1993 study of four students in a late French immersion program in Australia and findings from a 1991 study, the report looks at three areas: students' response to the learning context, including its more and less helpful characteristics; the experiences students consider most important for learning the language, including those relating to the nature of the language learned; and individual learning strategies. The four case studies were students in an Australian Year 9 program. In making sense of what is going on in the classroom, students reported experiencing four phases: (1) heavy reliance on translation as a receptive strategy; (2) recognition of key words; (3) relaxation and listening or reading for the main idea; and (4) comprehension without conscious strategy. Strategies for coping with confusion were also identified. In producing output, students felt it important that the teacher help bridge the gap between what they could say and what they wanted to say. Students found tendencies toward code-switching and code-mixing, and the use of private speech in French, examples of emerging bilingualism, to be annoying. The earlier study found that internalized speech in the target language, both inside and outside the immersion context, was one strategy used to make sense of the language. Contains a 10-item bibliography. (MSE)

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Language learning experiences of Australian French immersion students

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Abstract

The author has been exploring language learning from the perspective of the students in a late French immersion school in Australia for a number of years. This paper is based mainly on the study conducted in 1993, but will also draw on results from a project conducted in 1991.

Immersion research has traditionally concentrated on outcomes, comparing immersion students with non-immersion students. By contrast, the approach adopted by the author was a synthesis of phenomenology, sociology and ethnography. The conceptual framework adopted viewed the classroom as a culture to be explored, rather than as a laboratory in which to conduct experiments or as a conversation to be analysed. Data were collected throughout two full school years in the form of transcripts of taped individual and group interviews, videos of classroom interaction, observation field notes and taped think-aloud protocols of reading tasks.

The most important language learning experience was the process of making sense of input. Students were found to follow four stages in this process. Also important was producing the second language. Evidence was found of the students' developing bilingualism in the use of private speech and involuntary code switching.

There is still much to be learned about what goes on in immersion classrooms, but results of these studies will provide insights for teachers in immersion programs.

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Introduction

I have been exploring language learning from the perspective of the students in a late French immersion school in Australia for a number of years. This paper is based mainly on a section of the results of an in-depth study conducted with four students in 1993. I will also draw on results from a project conducted at the same school in 1991.

The study as a whole was conducted with four learners in French immersion and four in Chinese immersion. Only results relating to the French immersion learners will be discussed in this paper.

The overall research question addressed by the study was:
How do learners experience the process of learning in immersion programs?

The sub-question which is the focus of this paper was:
What experiences do they consider important for learning the language?

The following aspects of the immersion experience had emerged as important in the previous study, and they will be used as headings to organise the results discussed in today's paper:
making sense of input,
producing language, and
becoming bilingual.

Immersion research has traditionally concentrated on outcomes, but the aim of this project was to follow four learners through a school year, in order to reveal aspects of the process of learning in immersion.

An ethnographic/phenomenological style of data collection and analysis was used for the project, which extended over a full school year. The data base consisted of transcriptions of observation notes and videos of classroom interactions, individual and group interviews and students' written answers to open ended questions.

This flow chart (see Appendix 1) illustrates how the study was conducted.

The students were John, Peter, Melissa and Helena (all pseudonyms), who were all in Year 9, which is the second year of a three-year late immersion program. The students were chosen as key informants after the period of initial observation and after discussions with their teacher. They were chosen because they were active in class, responsive to questioning, and neither the best nor the weakest students in the class.

Analysis of the data initially involved a search of the data base for themes which were common across all the learners. Analysis was an iterative process, involving a gradual refinement and definition of the themes and categories found in the data.

The final themes which emerged from the data were grouped under the following three headings, which relate closely to the original research questions (in parentheses):

- Students' response to the learning context (How do learners respond to the learning context? What aspects of the context were helpful/unhelpful?)
- Language learning experiences (What experiences do they consider important for learning the language? Does the nature of the language in question make a difference to the context and to the learners' experience of it?)

- Individual approaches to learning(including strategies). (How do learners in immersion programs experience the process of learning a second language?)

This paper will discuss only those results which relate to the language learning experiences of the four Year 9 French immersion students who acted as key informants for the study.

1. Making sense of input

In making sense of what is going on in the classroom, the immersion students report passing through four phases. The first stage is a heavy reliance on translation of everything one hears or reads into English. During the second stage, learners "latch onto" key words and guess at the meaning of the rest of the sentence.

The third stage sees the learners "relaxing and getting the gist". In the final stage, the learners do not seem aware that they are working in a second language. This is the "out of awareness" stage. The learners did not necessarily go through these stages at the same time, but this path to "making sense" did seem to be common for them all.

1.1 Translation as a receptive strategy

The fact that translation was the first strategy used by the learners to make sense of their situation may come as a surprise to you. Results relating to the classroom context showed that translation into the mother tongue (English) is generally avoided in this immersion classroom, and there is an insistence by all the participants on the maintenance of a second language context.

Nevertheless, the students reported that translation was the first way they tried to make sense of what was going on in the classroom. For the students, the previous year, Year 8, had been a fairly confusing time. John said in May that in Year 8 he could not "remember ever, you know, really understanding what [was] going on".

Helena admitted in her May interview that in Year 8 she "was basically translating everything". She went on, "so I wasn't thinking in French ... the words were there and I'd translate them, so I was actually thinking in English". The other three students volunteered similar comments about how they USED to make sense of what they read or listened to. John explained in his interview why this method was difficult:

> It's hard to read in French when you don't understand what's going on in the book and you're just trying to piece together, translating into English every time in your mind and ... you're reading and then you go "ah that means this and that means this" it's sort of hard to understand.

From the learners' comments, it seems that translation of whole passages into English was abandoned as a strategy after about a year in immersion.

1.2 Using key words

The second stage in the development of the learners' techniques for making sense was the use of key words. What the students would do is listen or read for certain words which they recognised as being important in the sentence or paragraph. What are these "key words" and how do the students use them?

Peter said that the key words he listened for were "the main operating- the main verbs in the sentence, things like that". Peter tended to translate what he saw as the key words into English so he could understand the rest of the sentence or paragraph. John explained in the December paired interview that if he was reading a difficult passage in French he would use the following technique:

> Well I'd read it over first and then I don't understand a word of it so I have to go back ... the main thing is key words, that's how you find out what's going on ... in the sentence, and you know usually from the sentence before and the sentence beafter [sic] you can work out what the middle is? [laughs] that's the only way I figure it out.

However, in order to use the "key words" technique, there need to be enough known words in a sentence for students to guess at the meaning of the rest.

The learners often spoke about how they had to listen really hard and concentrate in order to make sense of what was going on. Helena said in October that "if you miss one little thing the rest of the class is completely lost". In May Peter had noted that "sometimes if you just let your concentration slip for about a second or so you just about miss the whole thing." Melissa and John also made comments about needing to concentrate really hard.

This stage of using key words seems to have varied from one to several months for the learners involved.

1.3 Relax and get the gist

In the next stage of making sense, the students report that they are much more relaxed about the whole immersion process. They have realised that it does not matter if they don't understand every word. They can just relax and try to understand the gist of what they are listening to or reading. In this stage of learning, if learners hear or see a word or character they don't know, rather than looking it up in the dictionary or asking a friend "what does that mean?", they just skip over what they don't understand and guess the meaning from the context. This is different from the key word strategy in two respects -- firstly, the students understand most of the sentence; there are just one or two words they don't know. Secondly, rather than translating the words they don't recognise, as

in the key word strategy, they simply ignore them and guess the meaning from context.

Melissa described the process as follows:

> When you're listening to the teacher most people they get what they can and if they don't understand it then, like, just forget it and work out what it is around it, you don't really ... pay much attention to the words.

1.4 Out of awareness stage

When learners have reached this stage, they are not aware of any particular strategies being used to make sense of input; they simply understand it. Not all of the learners in this study had reached this stage by the end of the year. John reported his excitement on the first occasion when things suddenly made sense. "This year I read something and I understood it and I was - amazed ... oh it was great! I mean, yeah, you can understand something and, you know [laughs]". All the learners in the French group had reached this stage, at least for some lessons, by the time of the recall interview or earlier.

In May, Peter reported that "I understand more French now. And I don't have to translate as much because I can understand more and more straight off". Melissa had noticed a difference between her learning strategies in Year 8 and Year 9. "I used to- like, couldn't live without my dictionary ... but now it's so much easier to, like, read it in French and understand it IN French instead of translating everything even in your head. You just live in French and it's so much easier, much quicker!" By May, Helena had also found that "I don't have to translate much, so I can think in French and like I can just write straight back in French most of the time".

These four stages could also be viewed as a gradual change from processing in English in the classroom to processing in French.

Feeling lost

However, over the course of the year there were occasions when things just did not make sense, when the students had the impression that everybody else was understanding and they were not. How did the learners feel in these situations and what did they do about it?

In the recall interview, John described a situation that he felt occurred fairly often. He would feel stupid because everybody else was understanding and he was not:

> J: In the subjects that are hard you don't- you just don't know what's going on, and then you can't really- you don't want to ask the teacher for help because then everybody else thinks you're stupid?
> ...
> R: how do you KNOW when other people know or don't know?
> J: because other people will go [shows frantic taking down of notes] and you will sit there going [shows looking around with a blank look] "oh, OK". you know.

Peter once missed a week of school in Year 8 and was really confused about even the basics when he got back to school. He said he "couldn't understand ANYTHING in class and so I felt really stupid". The girls also made comments about feeling stupid.

What did the students do when things stopped making sense? Students most commonly used the "what did she say?" strategy. They would also try to listen harder to the teacher and to their fellow students to try to pick up the thread of what was being said. John said he would also observe what everybody else was doing and say to himself "Ok, well, they're doing that and you'd better do this as well"!

For the students, one other way of coping with stress was to escape mentally -- to think of something totally unconnected with the lesson. Helena and Melissa discussed this in their paired interview:

M: and when you're trying to work out what a particular word is, like then you miss it all, or it's so hard to understand you just don't get it so you start thinking about what you're going to do on the weekend!
H: yeah, I just dream off! [giggles]

In summary, not understanding what was going on in class made students feel variously "stupid", "angry" or "frustrated". To overcome these feelings they would (1) listen harder to try to pick up the thread; (2) make a joke to break the tension; or (3) use an avoidance strategy like communing with their dictionaries.

2. Producing Language Output

The students all spoke of the importance to their language learning of having (or making) opportunities to speak in French. In the stimulated recall interview the issue of speaking in French was discussed:

R: what's so important about speaking French, then?
P: because then you get to learn French more, and you get used to it and so it starts clicking in your head
R: mm. how does it start clicking in your head, do you reckon?
P: well if you speak it a lot you get used to it and it just [sticks there
H: [yeah

On viewing the videotapes of their lessons, the French immersion students were surprised to see how much they actually said in the lessons; how many questions they answered. John and Helena discussed this:

J: Yeah. I didn't think I speak that- I don't- when I'm class I don't think I speak French at all - most of the time (I was talking to Tim) ...
H: yeah. I didn't think I answered that many questions
J: I didn't think I answered ANY questions!

<u>"Bridging" or Comprehensible output</u>

However, the students felt that it wasn't simply speaking in French that was important. What was needed was for the teacher to "bridge" between what they

COULD say and what they WANTED to say. In this aspect of a student's language learning experience, the teacher understands what a student is struggling to say, and provides the word needed for the student to continue and express his or her meaning. This is related to Merrill Swain's idea of comprehensible or "pushed" output where learners are pushed to produce more than they normally would produce. "Bridging" was the name given to the phenomenon by one of the Chinese immersion students who was part of the other half of the study.

Many examples of "bridging" were found in the observation notes of the French class. The following example from the Science lesson videotaped on August 3 is typicalhelps him to provide a fuller answer in French by using "bridging":

T: Qu'est-ce que c'est le système circulatoire? John?
J: C'est le système qui - ah - qui - ah//
T: //Qu'est-ce qu'il fait?/
J: carries it away
T: qu'est-ce que c'est "carry"?
Ss: il transporte
J: transporter les ah sang
T: le sang
J: sang
T: où?
J: around le corps, you know, around the body
T: OK essaie. C'est le système, répète, c'est le système qui transporte
J: transporte le sang around the body
T: OK essaie de le dire - qu'est-ce que c'est "around the body"?
S: autour de le corps
T: autour du corps.
J: autour de le corps

The teacher didn't correct "de le" and moved on to veins, etcetera. Perhaps enough was enough. However, if the teacher had not insisted and drawn him out, John would have ieft his answer at "carries it away".

When the students were watching this section of the videotape, John talked about what had been going through his mind during the above interchange:

J: I hate it when she does that keeps asking you the question
R: so what was- what was going on there?
J: oh she asked me what was the système circula- you know ciculato-
R: circulatoire
J: yeah and then I just told her- I said it just takes it around the body and transports oxygen and energy a lot of that scientific explanation
R: yeah it took a while to get out didn't it?
J: yeah - well I'm not that good at French as you know I don't speak it at home or anything ...
R: but you still made a good job of getting all of that out I thought
J: I did? no I don't know/
R: yeah/
J: I don't know what was going through my mind I just -had to get the answer out before she could ask ME some more I suppose [laughs] just get away from me!
R: why, do you feel uncomfortable when she sort of asks you more and more?
J: yeah - I don't like - it sort of makes you feel stupid because you can't even talk- tell her the answer in French you know, it makes you feel stupid
R: mm. I think you did well though
J: well you FEEL stupid, I (do...)

At the end of the year in their paired interview, Peter and John joked about being forced to produce more French:

P: yeah I know, you don't really answer [the question
J: [you're not prepared for it, you're prepared for the answer you're going to give and then she asks you this and you don't know it and you look like an idiot, but you would have looked really smart if you had've answered the first part of the question, which you did
R: mm mm
J: you answer the first part, really easily, but then she hits you with a second left hand/
P: shot/
J: below the belt

However, as stated earlier, the students want French to start "clicking" so they keep up the struggle to produce French. They may not like "bridging" as it makes them the focus of attention, but they always keep trying to give the teacher more language.

Becoming bilingual

Over the course of the year, the students noted examples of their emerging bilingualism in French and English, some of which casued them great

annoyance. These examples included code-switching and mixing, and the use of private speech in French.

Code mixing. Code mixing refers to the insertion of one or more words from one language into speech or writing in another language. Code mixing may be conscious or unconscious. Genesee notes that the mixing typical of bilingual language development does not only consist of complete words, but that elements of the phonology and syntax of the other language may also intrude. It may also happen that the use of a word in French will cause a person to switch from speaking in English to speaking in French. Genessee refers to this as code switching. Most of the evidence for the students' developing bilingualism consisted of examples of code mixing and private speech.

Conscious code-mixing and swithcing

Examples of code-mixing and switching observed during class time consisted mainly of the deliberate insertion of an English word into a student's French utterance. The purpose of this was either to have the teacher provide an unknown word in French, or simply to get the message across more quickly. I questioned the French students about this in the recall interview:

R: and when you do speak French, I notice sometimes people will put an English word in, what happens then?
P: oh you just can't think of the word in French
J: you have to say it in English
R: yeah
H: and she usually tells [you the
J: [and then [the teacher] will tell you what it is

Unconscious code-switching and mixing

Many examples of involuntary code-switching and mixing were discussed in the interviews and written answers. The girls discussed the issue in their December interview. Helena said that "it's just like, you say little things and you don't realise it?" She gave an illustration of this:

H: like if you're talking to your friends and - you're having a conversation and then if you just say "why?" I always end up going "pourquoi"
R: uh huh?
H: and if you're speaking to, people who don't speak French they just go ["what?"
M: ["pardon?"/
H: and you go "oh! sorry!" like, you know

John provided another example during the boys' paired interview:

sometimes when we're just fooling - just like- when you speak a bit the same word over and over in class you sort of- like when someone asks you a question you sort of go "oui" instead of "yes"

Melissa found that her code-mixing occurred "especially if you're writing, I do it more in writing". She said that it did not usually happen to her with talking. She gave several examples of the intrusion of French into her English writing:

M: in English and for "and" I always put ["et"
H: [yeah so do I! I always do that!
M: and you put different endings like for "ic" you always put q-u-e at the end of it/
H: yeah/
M: and then you get mixed with the spelling too with words that are like [yeah] similar like classic
R: mm mm
M: I always like- can't remember if it's q-u-e or/
H: yeah.

An example of the "q-u-e" ending intruding in speech came from Peter in the boys' paired interview where he stated his belief that "scientific principles like Physics and, Chemistry and that are straightforward, logique".

Private speech.

In the 1991 study it was found that one of the ways in which the students made sense of their situation was by the use of internalized and egocentric speech in the foreign language. In order to operate *in* the second language they need to internalize their means of expressing in the second language. This is not just practicing or manipulating form, but *being* in another language.

This use of private speech was first noted in the classroom observations in May, 1991, the third month of the study. Up until then, observations had concentrated on what was said out loud. When the focus was shifted away from what could be heard to what could be seen, the classroom took on a different aspect.

What had previously seemed (to the ear) to be rows of students listening attentively but passively to what the teacher was saying was transformed into a group of students participating actively, but silently, in the lesson. This is what often happens when the teacher asks a question:

Year 9 Science, May 23, 1991
teacher - avec un front froid et une pression basse, quel temps?
- with a cold front and low pressure, what sort of weather (do you have)?
student 1 [to self] - il fait froid
- it's cold
student 2 [to self] - nuages...poussent
- clouds...push

When one student answered one of the teacher's questions out loud in French, there were at least two others answering privately in French. Some students also practiced silently in French before they gave their answer out loud, like this:

student - [to self] cent quatre-vingts divisé par trois
- 180 _ 3
[then she gave her answer out loud]

These are the reasons given by the students for using private speech in this way:

In 1991, the students gave four main reasons for deliberate use of private speech:

1. for positive reinforcement of one's own answer;

2. to avoid losing face by calling out a potentially wrong answer;

3. to make sense of the question itself;

4. to get more practice in using the language.

However, even outside the context of the immersion classroom, the students could not stop themselves from talking to themselves in French. Many students reported that French just takes over their minds and keeps "popping into" their thoughts when they least expect it. Some keep up an almost continuous conversation with themselves in the second language. Sometimes students are aware that this is happening:

Year 9 students, 1991
Researcher - and once before, we were talking about *thinking* in French and Amanda said she started thinking on the netball court, what sort of things do you think?
Amanda - I don't know, it's just like, you're trying to say something about the netball game to yourself and it comes out in French, and you think "what is this?!" it just comes...like in Grade Eight when you're really new to it, it just, once you know a bit, it just keeps on popping into your mind/
Caroline - working out in your mind because you've done so much of it, and like, trying to figure it out.

Year 9 students, 1991
Researcher - what is it then about being in an immersion class that sort of switches you over into thinking in French?
Peter - you've got to think in French because everyone around you is speaking in French
Ivy - yeah, and we speak French in our brain because we want to be better at it, be automatic at it

Jenny, Year 8, 1991 - sometimes, you know, you speak really softly and everything, trying to, you know, when you're learning something...

However, most of the time, students are not consciously aware of the fact that their internal conversations are proceeding in French. Students generally become aware of this phenomenon by accident, when they go to speak or write in English and the wrong language comes out.

Nicole, Year 10, 1991 - yeah, I find myself just coming out and saying things; like I asked a friend who's not in immersion the other day -- I said «Quelle heure est-il?» instead of "what time is it?". You just get used to it. You say «oui» or «non» to people in shops and you go, "hang on here!"

Year 9 students, 1991
Chrissie - and sometimes, like, you've just done a French lesson or something or you've just done a lesson in French and you'll go to write something in English and you'll end up using half the words in French.

It was interesting to note that the students do not see this as "thinking in French".

Year 10 students, 1991
Researcher - Are there lots of times when you find that you're thinking in French when you're not in the classroom?
John - no
Dominique - you don't think in French; I just come out and say it without meaning to

Even when students make a conscious effort to *not* speak French, it is so much a part of them that they cannot avoid its use:

Max, Year 8, 1991- there was one stage where I picked up the phone and I was about to say «Bonjour» into it, and like, we had a weekend off once where Miss Andrews said "No French" and I kept on...like a word would be said or something and I'd think of it in French...so I'm going, "get this out of my brain!"

Students in the 1993 study also gave examples of their use of French in their heads. Helena said that:

> sometimes if I'm um thinking something then I'll like-for some reason I'll just like translate it in my head, like I'll translate whatever I just thought or whatever, I sometimes do that.

Melissa said that she was not aware of this because "I wouldn't realise it because I was thinking it". However, her next sentence indicated that she must think in French sometimes because "you don't realise that you're speaking it until someone goes - 'what?' so you don't really realise that you're thinking."

During the boys' paired interview they were asked about talking to themselves in French, and provided some examples:

R: Ok other people have said that like when they're playing- playing sport or just walking around, they'll talk to themselves about what they're doing, in French
J: yeah I've done that. you're just thinking about it//
P: once I played basketball in the back yard and just commentated on the game in French
R: mm mm?
P: but that's about it
R: yeah. and what have you done, John?
J: what you just said? basically. can't remember when, but you know, I know exact- sort of moments when you've done it like you know. when you're, trying to learn a bit and you just sort of, think of it in French instead of English.

4. Summary

In summary, the main language learning process experienced by the key informants in this study was making sense of the classroom, which involved a gradual abandonment of translation as a receptive strategy, moving through comprehension of key words, to comprehension of gist, to an out of awareness understanding stage; a change from processing in English to processing in French.

The second common experience was that of feeling lost or stupid when what was going on in the classroom had ceased to make sense. Students described their feelings and what they did to regain the thread of what was going on.

Third was the importance to language learning of producing comprehensible output. Attention needs to be consistently paid to correct pronunciation and correct form within the context of meaning.

Lastly, evidence of the students' growing bilingualism was discussed. This was shown through code-switching and mixing and private speech in the second language.

Research implications are that there is still much to be learned about what goes on in immersion classrooms, in particular the students' growing bilingualism. Much could also be learned about learning processes in regular, non-immersion classrooms through explorations following the framework used for this study.

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Appendix 1.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
FRENCH GROUP